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AUTHOR Converse, Jerry
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ABSTRACT

Although reading flexibility (readers' adjustment of their reading rates at levels of comprehension beyond the easiest levels) is a term that has appeared in the literature since 1928, no satisfactory test has been devised to measure it. Three problems must be solved first: another measurement than words per minute must be found; readability must be joined with readers' purposes and be less dependent on vocabulary, syllable and word counts; and a major breakthrough must occur in measuring comprehension beyond surface levels. (TJ)

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What Is So Difficult About Measuring Flexibility

by

Jerry Converse

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The term, reading flexibility, is not new to the literature. Harris (1968) said it first appeared in 1928. Blommers and Lindquist (1944) published their criteria about constructing a flexibility test, at a time when it seemed researchers were trying to test the relationship between speed of reading and comprehension. A more serious effort to construct both informal and standardized tests to measure flexibility, however, began in the 1950's with Carrillo and Sheldon (1952) and has continued with Piccinino (1977). The writer believes that educators still do not have a valid and reliable test of reading flexibility in published form.

Because of the complexity of measuring reading flexibility, many aspects have not yet been resolved. The more important aspects generally group around four main issues: rate, purpose, readability and comprehension. In this paper the writer will explore these issues, raise questions and point towards needed work for measuring reading flexibility.

Rate

In the writer's opinion a minor issue of measuring reading flexibility is determining rate of reading. Flexibility test constructors disagreed on whether to include total task time (Piccinino, 1977) or "reading" time only (Letson, 1960). Should the rate score include purpose setting, reading time, answering questions, completing the task or any combination of these? Blommers and Lindquist (1944) suggested that the rate score should not reflect any time spent getting the wrong answer. At one time the Nelson-Denny Test reported a rate score without even a check on comprehension. The writer believes a reasonable position can be defended on some of these points. The rate score, however, must reflect some type of comprehension check and should be reported in a form other than words per minute.

The main thrust in the literature about rate of reading has been on a words-per-minute score. This has seriously handicapped progress in testing for reading flexibility. When an efficient reader was actively reading to satisfy his purposes, he did not read words in a conventional way. Rather, he processed ideas, which were made up of combinations of words. The words-per-minute thinking said that each word has equal value with every other word read. This was just not so. Somehow, a good flexibility test must find a way to measure the reader's performances on varying tasks, according to his purposes and report the results in some type of reading efficiency rating.

Purpose

As generally discussed in the literature on measuring reading flexibility, purpose was a minor issue. One group of researchers looked at it from a teacher-set versus student-set purposes. Several writers held the position that student-set purposes were the only valid way to measure flexibility. A contrasting position allowed the tester to set purposes, believing the reader would internalize them and use them as his own. A very different look at purpose lead to a discussion of general or specific directions. Braam (1963) and Letson (1960) told the reader, "Read as quickly (rapidly) as you can and still understand...." McDonald (1957) instructed the reader to look for a specific answer, "How many were unemployed in January?" Stauffer (1976) helped students internalize teacher-set purposes by instructing them to speculate, before they read, what they thought the answer might be. In future flexibility test construction, the writer strongly advocates a combination of tester purposes, absorbed by the reader through the speculation process.

Readability

Generally, test constructors measured flexibility in rate by changing the content of the passages. The assumption was that each content had its own reading difficulty, e.g., science, as science, was more difficult to read than literature. Since flexibility is an advanced reading skill, however, the reader brings widely varying experiences to his reading comprehension. These experiences directly determine both the

reader's comprehension and the level of difficulty of the material. In addition, they indirectly affect his purposes for reading. Nacke (1971) pointed this out in his work on assessing flexibility. The writer is not denying that the vocabulary load, content density and complex sentence patterns are factors of readability. But he believes that because readability as previously pursued in flexibility testing has not been fruitful, constructors of tests must look at the problem in a different way. For example, Piccinino (1977) successfully used one long selection divided into equal parts and established different purposes for each one. Readability of the test materials must be tied somehow to the reader's purpose and not to the content of the passage.

Comprehension

Measuring reading comprehension in a flexibility test is the most difficult problem. Letson (1960) recommended testing for flexibility at the factual level only. Almost every other test constructor attempted in some way to measure comprehension beyond details. Farr's (1969) statements about the difficulties of measuring comprehension are appropriate for flexibility testing. In his work he cited Goodman's belief that neither the reading task nor reading comprehension can be fragmented into isolated skills. In spite of almost universal acceptance in the literature that there are varying levels of comprehension, this writer has serious doubts that group tests can accurately measure them. The complexities of communication among writer, tester and reader

seem insurmountable, when testing at higher inference, judgement or appreciation levels. The irony is that flexibility testing is an attempt to measure how well the reader adjusts his rate at levels of comprehension beyond the easiest levels. The writer believes that, at this time, no valid and reliable tests are available to measure comprehension in reading flexibility.

Recommendations

The writer believes that three problems must be solved before educators have a valid and reliable reading flexibility test. We must move away from the meaningless label of words per minute. We must join readability with reader's purposes and be less dependent on vocabulary, syllable and word counts. Finally, we must make a major breakthrough in measuring comprehension beyond the surface levels.

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